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Art in the Eurasian Iron Age

Context, connections and scale

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Introduction: Context, connections and scale

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Around 500 BC a new mode of visual expression emerged in Europe. To the north of the Alps, craftspeople began to decorate objects in ways that were strikingly different from the long-standing traditions of the preceding millennia (*e.g.* Garrow & Gosden 2012, 40–41; Jacobsthal 1944, 155–58; Wells 2008; 2012; Chapter 3, this volume). Whereas the artistic styles of the Bronze Age had been built around repetitive arrangements of geometric motifs, this new style was founded on swirling patterns and imagery where the boundaries between individuals (both human and animal) and objects are blurred. It also presented an increasingly sharp contrast with Mediterranean art of the same period, which generally emphasised narrative, symmetry and what might be thought of as 'realistic' representations of the world (Gosden *et al.* 2016). This new style, though sometimes referred to as *La Tène*, after its type-site in Switzerland, is more commonly known as Celtic Art.

We use the term 'Celtic Art' here (and in our chapters throughout this volume) with caution, emphasising its combined identity as an academic construct by capitalising both 'Celtic' and 'Art' and acknowledging that, as a label, it has meant many things to many people over the past 200 years (see Farley & Hunter 2015). Arguably, it is defined by a classic series of objects picked out by 19th century scholars (*e.g.* Kemble *et al.* 1863; Westwood 1856 – as discussed by Collis 2003; 2014; Morse 2005) and consolidated as an archaeological category over the course of the 20th century (*e.g.* Allen 1904; Dechelette 1908; Hawkes 1931; 1959; Jacobsthal 1944; Leeds 1933; Megaw 1970; Megaw & Megaw 1989; Stead 1985a; 1985b). However, in recent decades, the idea that this diverse group of objects can be seen as evidence for a single 'Celtic' community in prehistory have been thoroughly contested (*e.g.* Collis 2003; Garrow & Gosden 2012; Garrow *et al.* 2008). Indeed, there has been a positive drive towards the deconstruction of Celtic Art, on the premise that the large group of objects it

encompasses are neither 'Celtic', nor 'Art' in the modern sense of the word (Gosden & Hill 2008).

This was a goal of the Technologies of Enchantment project, which set out to investigate the ways in which Celtic Art was deployed (through its production, use and deposition) on different contexts to bring together images, objects, people and spaces (Garrow & Gosden 2012). The European Celtic Art in Context (ECAIC) project (2015–2018) expanded this approach to continental Europe to consider what Celtic Art has to say about the way Iron Age Europeans understood the world and their place within it (see Gosden *et al.* 2016). The project explored two deliberately controversial ideas: that there are good reasons to directly compare the traditions of art that had emerged to the north and south of the Alps by the mid-1st millennium BC, and that, to a greater or lesser extent, both art forms derive from two wider streams of interaction at a continental scale.

Art can be seen as a proxy for broader changes in society. In the Classical world, we can see changes in the modes of representation as a reflection of an increasingly mechanistic view of the universe. Celtic Art, by contrast, could be seen as animistic: one in which spirits inhabit the material world. The contrast between an animistic Celtic Art and a naturalistic Classical tradition is obviously contentious. Scholars from Jacobsthal onwards have often looked for the origins of Celtic Art in the Mediterranean world, so that the northern forms become an unsophisticated, barbarian version of the arts of the civilised south, no doubt a reflection of the Classical training of early art historians in the study of Celtic Art. While it is undoubtedly true that some borrowing of motifs occurs from the Mediterranean into temperate Europe, this is relatively limited, and the idiom within which borrowed motifs, such as lotuses, are placed shows a contrasting sensibility and overall approach to the world.

Olivier (2014) has described Celtic Art as 'intellectually realistic', arguing that it is true to a set of ideas stressing transformation, transparency and repositioning, rather than to a desire to represent the world as it appears to us. Processes such as *rabatment*, where both halves of an animal or object may be seen at once, or *transparency*, where one part of a scene can be looked through to perceive another, allow the depiction of a world in the process of transformation – in its geometric elements, which play with shape and form, but also in the relationship between people, plants and animals, which morph into one another or where time is brought into play in a manner reminiscent of Cubism. This is not a primitive art unable to accurately reproduce the world, but a sophisticated series of plays on the essential qualities of living and non-living beings. Celtic Art is a true representation of the cosmological ideas of cause, effect and temporality. Coincidental with the start of Celtic Art, just after 500 BC, Greek artists developed new modes of naturalistic painting and statuary, which became a key strand of later Roman art and is linked to the rise of novel forms of individualism (see Elsner 2007 for an analysis of Roman art).

Using a contrast between intellectually realistic and naturalistic representation, we can identify two streams of art and sensibility in the ancient world. A northerly

stream runs from the steppe to the Atlantic starting at least in the middle of the 1st millennium BC and concerns ambiguity, play and transformation, with a changing balance between geometric and figurative forms. A southerly stream runs from the Persian world to Italy over the same time period and is partly concerned with a more conventionally realistic portrayal of people and sacred beings in painting, statuary and on metal or pottery vessels. Both were in contact, but where motifs or forms were shared, they were incorporated into a style with a different logic of construction and appreciation. We are attempting to analyse Celtic Art as an element of the northerly stream, looking at the recurrence of the logic of construction after the decline of the Roman empire.

If Celtic Art is looked at as part of a broader Eurasian universe of form and decoration, we want to know what this universe looked like and how resemblances of form and decoration manifest themselves from central Asia to the Persian world to Europe. The largest scale of question is what was the effect of these styles in helping to create local groups and an international milieu? We are developing ideas current in art history, anthropology and archaeology to look at how aesthetic effects derived from and fed into notions of cosmology, political power and identity. Although techniques (*e.g.* filigree and granulation) and specific motifs (such as lyres and palmettes) undoubtedly derive from the Mediterranean world, they are accepted into an ontology in which the boundaries between people, animals, plants and objects were not fixed and stable, a world we can broadly call animistic. Such animistic art is found with variations widely across Eurasia: 'At a time when the new style developed in Europe, during the 5th century BC, S-curves, spirals, formlines, and stylized, sometimes hybrid animals – can be found across much of temperate Eurasia' (Wells 2012, 204). At the level of material, torcs from the Glauberg in Germany have been found to be made from Achaemenid gold (Megaw & Megaw 1989). Comparative work has started, but needs to be pursued in a more systematic manner. Within Europe connections have also been pursued, and here a prime example of relatedness and differentiation is supplied by coins. Some of the key contexts of burial, such as tumuli, are found in very similar form right across Eurasia in the early and middle 1st millennium BC (Gosden *et al.* 2018).

More local questions need also be asked: what were the regional variations of Celtic Art in a series of crucial areas of Europe in which Celtic Art is common, including Ireland, Britain, the Aisne/Marne region of France, the Mosel-Rhine area, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech and Slovak Republics and the Carpathian Basin? Is it now possible to chart the differential distribution of key motifs (s-curves, spirals, circles and animal ornament), forms (animal forms, cauldrons/situlae, fibulae, helmets, horse gear, mirrors, torcs and swords), materials (gold, silver, bronze and iron) and contexts (graves, settlements, hoards, watery locations, religious sites)? Secondly, what were the longer distance connections of Celtic Art, both within Europe and beyond? There are specific sets of links, such as swords with dragon pairs found in eastern France and Pannonia, which might indicate gift partnerships or other links.

A crucial element is the link between style and contexts. Discussions of Celtic Art are full of discussions of style, but these rarely break free from issues of chronology. Jacobsthal defined the Early, Waldalgesheim, Sword and Plastic Styles as successive modes of art through the Early and Middle Iron Age (a scheme modified for Britain by Stead [1985a] and discussed by Garrow and Gosden [2012]). Worries about chronology have focused attention away from what styles are composed of and, especially, what they might do in terms of sensory perceptions or emotional responses. We are attempting to characterise styles in terms of what they were composed of and what they did. Celtic Art has often been seen as a series of parts (forms and motifs), with fewer attempts to specify the rules of combination and transformation (Megaw & Megaw 1989).

The subtitle of this volume is *context, connections and scale*: three interlinked themes that connected the main interests of the ECAIC project. Each of the papers in the volume deals with these themes in different ways. The ECAIC project has pursued an expanded notion of context by examining it not only in its archaeological sense, but also considering the contexts of Iron Age patterns and images on single impressive objects and within much wider assemblages. The authors focus on different temporal and spatial scales, with some examining huge assemblages at continental scales or considering long term change, and others conducting far more detailed enquiries into individual objects to access particular moments in time. They highlight that connections between people and objects lie at the core of what Iron Age art did, and which allowed for the movement of ideas and practices across large distances.

This volume originates from ongoing conversations with members of the ECAIC project's Advisory Board as well as a workshop hosted in September 2017 at Oxford, entitled *Art in the Eurasian Iron Age*. This volume presents 11 of the papers given at the conference, a historic publication by Paul Jacobsthal (up to now unpublished) and an introduction of this work by Sally Crawford and Katharina Ulmschneider, as well as a discussion paper by Tim Champion.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 comprise broad-scale introductions to the material this volume deals with, providing perspectives on the role of art in Iron Age society, long-distance connections across Eurasia during the 1st millennium BC and the usefulness of the ECAIC database in pursuing the study of these broad themes. The volume opens with a characterisation of the Iron Age and its art by Chris Gosden (Chapter 1), who considers the networks, assemblages and events involved in material lives during this volatile period of later prehistory. Gosden highlights the new questions being asked of so-called Celtic Art in recent work, and the ways in which they may lead to new understandings of the group dynamics and performance that were crucial to Iron Age life. Chapter 2 comprises an introduction to the ECAIC database by Courtney Nimura, Helen Chittock, Chris Gosden and Peter Hommel of the ECAIC project, who provide details of the construction and analysis of the database and the challenges and new questions this process brought. They also begin to demonstrate the types of questions this database will be used to answer in the

project's forthcoming monograph. In Chapter 3, Peter Wells provides a comprehensive overview of design elements and practices that were shared across stretches of Eurasia during the 1st millennium BC and the spheres of interaction through which long-distance connections may have occurred at a time where profound cultural changes were occurring across this part of the globe. Wells identifies motifs, for example s-spirals and palmettes, which comprise the basis of Celtic Art but also appear across Eurasia.

Chapters 4 and 5 encompass studies of differing aspects of Iron Age imagery, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. Both chapters tackle the issues of realism and representation in prehistoric art to question the deeper ideas, worldviews and sensibilities displayed in art across different parts of Iron Age Eurasia. Rebecca O'Sullivan and Peter Hommel look eastwards in Chapter 4, where they consider the tradition of depicting fantastical composite animals, which formed an important aspect of Iron Age art across the Eurasian steppe and beyond. They use the distinctive ways these images were constructed to examine northern Eurasian cosmologies and contrast the structuring of imagery with that of the Mediterranean world. Helen Chittock focuses on a different aspect of Iron Age imagery in Chapter 5, examining anthropomorphic images from across Europe at multiple scales. She focuses on the tactile nature of the images and demonstrates similarity and difference in the ways they functioned in time and space, also emphasising the contrast with Mediterranean traditions of depicting people.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 all deal with the fundamental principles of art in Iron Age Europe and the mechanisms through which it operated, with a focus on time and memory. Following on from Chapters 4 and 5, in Chapter 6, Laurent Olivier advances the idea that Celtic Art is not 'aniconic' as has sometimes been suggested, rather the depictions it encompasses do not conform to modern, Western ideas of realism. Olivier examines the intellectual realism that lies behind Celtic Art, arguing that the imagery is not deliberately hidden, as is often argued, but that it represents an ontological perception of reality different from our own, and that of those inhabiting Mediterranean societies during the late 1st millennium BC. Chapter 7 comprises a reconsideration of the roles of motifs in Celtic Art by Jody Joy. Whilst the study of the motif has been somewhat shunned in recent decades, Joy demonstrates their capacity to act and re-contexutalises them as parts of objects. Drawing on the work of Alfred Gell, he argues that motifs can create relations between people and objects in the past, present and future, presenting a case study from Snettisham in Norfolk, East Anglia. In Chapter 8, Nathalie Ginoux also considers some of the underlying processes involved in the design and perception of European Celtic Art and the capacities of its makers to inscribe time and memory into the objects they create. Ginoux argues that its ambiguous designs formed important mnemonic devices, much like the work of poets and bards described in early medieval and Classical literature. Through a process of 'iconographic concentration', Celtic Art objects produced powerful sensory experiences.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 deal with the potential long-distance connections between craftspeople and the ways in which designs travel in time and space. In Chapter 9, Dirk Krausse presents new findings from the Heuneburg plateau in south-west Germany. He argues that a proto-La Tène style was developing here as early as the 6th century BC, driven by a group of innovative craftspeople, who were influenced by Mediterranean style and technique. This local group of *avant garde* artists formed one aspect of the complex series of influences and connections that led to the emergence of La Tène art in Europe. Rena Maguire's contribution in Chapter 10 focuses on Iron Age equestrian equipment, or 'tack'. Maguire seeks to explain the appearance of similar motifs in distant parts of Europe at different times during the Iron Age, suggesting that particular, well-known motifs were chosen to appear on items of horse gear in Late Iron Age Ireland to invoke stability and security at a time of stress and volatility. Machling and Williamson's detailed study of the crafting of gold torus torcs from Iron Age Britain comprises Chapter 11. They draw on the insights of modern-day goldsmiths and jewellers as valuable sources of evidence on the intricate techniques required to create torcs, and this approach has allowed for the identification of individual makers and for new perspectives on the sharing of skill and knowledge amongst Iron Age goldworkers.

Chapters 12 and 13 form a pair. Chapter 13 presents a previously unpublished paper written by Paul Jacobsthal and presented to the Oxford Philological Society in 1938, having arrived at the University of Oxford in 1936 as a refugee from Nazi Germany. In the paper, Jacobsthal traces a particular motif, a 'monster' across Eurasia, discussing long-distance connections in time and space, but notably downplaying his primary specialism in Early Celtic Art. Sally Crawford and Katharina Ulmschneider's contribution, Chapter 12, precedes Jacobsthal's paper and forms an introduction to his ideas and an examination of the emergence of this work at a pivotal moment in his career, which would also influence his personal future. By examining the political and personal context of this piece of work, Crawford and Ulmsneider demonstrate the importance of considering the environment in which scholarship is produced.

In the final chapter, Tim Champion gives an overview of the ideas presented in this volume. In an extremely useful critique of many approaches to Celtic Art, Champion argues partly for holism, saying that we should set the analysis of decorated metalwork within a broader range of material culture within the Iron Age, including also the general history of metallurgy. He further stresses the importance of the wider cultural milieu of the Iron Age, in particular the importance of poetry and song.

Celtic Art is an old body of material being substantially added to by new finds. At least as importantly, the decorated materials from the later Iron Age continuously show sets of possibilities for new thought and analyses at a series of scales from a single object to connections across Eurasia. The papers in this volume demonstrate many of the possibilities inherent in Celtic Art, while also indicating many novel directions.

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